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# **Is Bologna Working? Employer and Graduate Reflections of the Quality, Value and Relevance of Business and Management Education in four EU Countries**

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This article focuses on the relevance of undergraduate Business and Management Higher Education from the perspectives of recent graduates and graduate employers in four European countries. Drawing upon the findings of an empirical qualitative study in which data was collated and analysed using grounded theory research techniques, the paper draws attention to graduates' and employers' perceptions of the value of Higher Education in equipping students with discipline-specific skills and knowledge as well as softer 'generic' skills. It also highlights the importance of formal 'work-based' learning within the undergraduate curricula in providing students with the skills and experiences required by employers operating within a global workplace.

## **Graduate Employment; Higher Education, Europe, Skills, Work-Based Learning**

### **1. Introduction**

This article focuses on the relevance of undergraduate Business and Management Higher Education from the perspectives of recent graduates and graduate employers. Drawing upon the findings of a qualitative empirical European study in which data was collated and analysed in four different EU countries (Austria, Romania, Slovenia and the UK), the views of recent graduates and employers in the four countries are discussed. By critiquing the study findings in a European policy context, the paper draws attention to the implications for business and management education in terms of curricula development and pedagogy. The paper concludes by noting that whilst many Higher Education institutions are beginning to introduce work-based learning, there is still some way to go before all undergraduate students are provided with the opportunity to acquire cultural capital whilst testing the applicability of what they have been taught within a real-life work situation.

### **2. Study Background**

#### **2.1 Background: EU policy**

*A 'Europe of knowledge is now recognised as an irreplaceable factor for social and human growth and as an indispensable component to consolidate and enrich the European citizenship' (BOLOGNA DECLARATION, 1999, p.1).* Indeed, the importance of education in the development of a stable, prosperous and democratic Europe has come to the forefront in recent European policy with key treaties and strategies emphasising the need for business and education to work together to promote a more cohesive and prosperous society (see for example BOLOGNA DECLARATION, 1999; EC, 2003, 2006a, 2006b; BOLOGNA PROCESS, 2007). Prompted by policy drivers, a recent growth in

collaborative projects has given rise to academic scrutiny of EU education policies (BEUKEL, 2001; RAKIC, 2001; BACHE, 2006) and to '*aspects of education policy [becoming] an established part of the Europeanization of national policy-making*' (BEUKEL, 2001, p.124).

Policies aimed at promoting the development a knowledge-based European economy (EC, 2007, 2008a, 2008b) have made education and training the cornerstone upon which, it is argued, Europe's '*future growth and prosperity depends*' (EC, 2007, p.C300/2). Furthermore, whilst the re-conceptualisation of education is not without pedagogical challenges (KOSHMANOVA, 2007), considerable progress has been made across the European Union in meeting the main tenets of the Bologna Declaration – particularly in respect of; movement towards a three-cycle degree system (Bachelors, Masters and Doctorate); quality assurance in Higher Education (HE); and the recognition of degrees and study periods across the Union (BOLOGNA PROCESS, 2007).

Despite such considerable policy input, little empirical pan-European research has been conducted evaluating employers' and recent graduates' perceptions of whether Higher Education across Europe is meeting the needs of the workforce. Indeed, the continued expansion of Higher Education across the EU would appear to reflect assumptions that a better educated workforce places nation states at an advantage within a knowledge-based society (REDMOND, 2006). Although Higher Education is now firmly ensconced within a global context arguments continue between employers and Higher Education about the state of graduate skills and whether Higher Education is equipping students with the skills and competencies necessary for success in the global workplace (JOHNSON, 2007). Contextual and conceptual difference between the two sectors make it is difficult to assess the extent to which recent graduates are meeting the needs of the workforce (LITTLE, 2003). By comparing and contrasting graduate and employer perceptions, this paper investigates the relevance and applicability of the 'core' Business and Management curriculum. In doing so it contributes to academic and employer debates in this area.

## **2.2 Context: Higher Education in each country**

Four European countries were included in the study: Austria, Romania, Slovenia, and the United Kingdom. The reasons for selecting these four countries was that they represented 'old' and 'new' Europe (Romania became a full member of the EU during the study). Moreover, the diverse nature of each country's socio-economic and educational background meant that the researchers were able to gain a wide-range of different perspectives and insights into graduate employability thus adding to the uniqueness of the study.

At the commencement of the study Slovenia had the smallest HE sector with just over 67,200 students (EIU, 2005a) enrolled at three state owned and managed universities and seven private Higher Education Institutions (DOLING, 2005). Austria had around 200,000 students (EIU, 2004, 2005b) enrolled in 50 Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), comprising a mixture of public and private universities and *Fachhochschulen* (Universities

of Applied Science). Of the four countries, Romania had the most complex HE sector with over one and half million students enrolled in 112 public and private universities and colleges (ARSENE, 2005). Higher Education in Romania is delivered by six different types of HEI comprising universities, Academies, Polytechnics, Institutes, Colleges and Postgraduate schools (MIROSLAV-VALERIU et al, 2002). The UK had the largest sector with around two million undergraduates (LIGHTFOOT, 2006) enrolled in 197 HEIs (SCIT, 2006). Whilst the majority of Higher Education in the UK is delivered by state owned universities, the sector also incorporates 47 public University colleges, eight international colleges and Universities, five postgraduate and professional institutions and one privately owned University (SCIT, 2006).

The study focused specifically on Business and Management and related programmes. In examining the curricula of Business Schools in each country, it was determined that a similar core content of business-related discipline specific undergraduate programmes is offered at Institutions across Europe. Generic modules include: Accounting, Business Economics, Strategic Management, Marketing and Human Relations. Such similarities suggest that on the surface, European Business Schools are moving towards the Bologna principle of similar, transferable qualifications. However, other similarities between the institutions in all four countries were more difficult to conceptualise with 'undergraduate' programme lengths varying from 2 years for a 'sub or part' Degree, to 6 years full time study for a Magister<sup>1</sup> qualification. Whilst the UK institutions had traditionally followed the 'three-tier' cycle<sup>2</sup> as depicted in Bologna, this was still a relatively new concept in the other countries. As such partner institutions from Slovenia, Austria and Romania were in a state of 'transformation', having recently introduced, or being in the process of introducing, Degrees which adhered to the three-tier cycle (to include Bachelors Degrees) - whilst still offering a programme reflective of the two-tier cycle with undergraduates receiving a Magister level qualification.

### **2.3 Background: Graduate employability**

The notion of graduate employability is a contentious issue that is both difficult to conceptualise and measure. In parts of Europe, interest in graduate employability reflects the massification of Higher Education over the past two to three decades. Conversely, a practical focus on the 'work-readiness' of recent graduates as a means of guaranteeing economic competitiveness in an increasingly global market-place, has meant that the concept of graduate employability has been given little attention (Little, 2003) and is thus an under-researched, but much discussed area.

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<sup>1</sup> Magister: A term used widely across Europe to describe a the qualification attained following three to six years undergraduate study at a University, Higher Education College or *Fachhochschulen*.

<sup>2</sup> Three-Tier Cycle: In the UK, Higher Education has traditional been offered at three levels leading to awards of Bachelors, Masters & Doctorate level Degrees. Sub-Degree qualifications such as Higher National Certificate and Diplomas have long formed part of UK Higher Education and been an integral part of the 'first-tier'; it should be noted that such qualifications are increasingly being replaced with Foundation Degrees (These represent the equivalent of two thirds of a traditional Bachelors Degree).

In the UK graduate employability is often associated with graduate employment and measured as an educational outcome under the auspices of 'first destination' statistics; these statistics show the percentage of recent graduates in employment six months after graduation (HARVEY et al: 2002). Whilst statistical league tables have become part of everyday life in Higher Education, it is difficult to see how they relate to the work-based requirements of employers. One study which did, however, aim to conceptualise and assess graduate employability was undertaken by SMITH et al (2000), who developed a method of measuring graduate employment outcomes based on cohorts of UK students since 1992.

The performance measures developed and utilised by SMITH et al revealed that at an individual level, the probability of unemployment or inactivity six months after graduation is influenced strongly by the individual's class of degree, subject studied, prior qualifications and social class background (2000). It would seem, therefore, that in addition to the quality of degree and level of transferable skills possessed by recent graduates, other factors come into play when determining employability. Such transferable key skills and competencies, which are identified in the literature, may be summarised thus: professionalism; reliability; ability to cope with uncertainty; ability to work under pressure; ability to plan and think strategically; ability to communicate and interact with others, either in teams or through networking; good written and verbal communication skills; information and communication technology skills; creativity and self-confidence; good self-management and time-management skills; willingness to learn and accept responsibility (for further details, see for example, McLARTY, 1998, TUCKER et al, 2000, ELIAS & PURCELL, 2004, RAYBOULD & SHEARD, 2005)

### **3. The Study Approach**

The study comprised two distinctive stages, the first an extensive analysis of the nature of Higher Education in each respective country, undertaken concurrently with a literature review focusing on graduate employability. The second stage comprised 20 in-depth semi-structured qualitative interviews with employers and recent business recent graduates in each country (15 recent graduates and 5 employers in each country). Using purposive sampling techniques (MAXWELL, 1996) Business and Management graduates were selected from partner Institutions' alumni. Graduate participants had all completed their studies in the two years prior to being interviewed and had achieved a Bachelors, or sub-Bachelors (Higher National Diploma or equivalent) level qualification. The reason for the sampling approach reflected the need to maintain comparability across the four countries. Thus, employers were purposively selected for their linkages with each institution's career or employment services. In order to promote comparability across the sample, employers were selected from three different areas of the economy; Public Administration (Local/ Regional Government and Civil/Public Service); Finance and Banking; and Local Industry.

Two semi-structured interview guides, grounded in themes and issues identified during the literature review, were developed (a copy of the interview guides is provided in the appendix). Commencing with demographic details, the employer interview guide focused

upon: the nature of graduate employment within the interviewees organisation (including recruitment and training policies); organisational links with Higher Education Institutes; the skills and competencies required of graduates in order that they succeed in the workplace; the organisational benefits and challenges of employing a graduate; the application of theoretical knowledge to the workplace. Graduate interview guides were more detailed, with background questions articulated in such a manner that would prompt a comparative analysis in accordance with the grounded theory methodological approach. The themes addressed in the graduate questionnaires were: the perceived value of business and management undergraduate level education in relation to the usefulness of theory and knowledge in a work situation; the value of Higher Education in respect of the acquisition of wider skills and competencies (including communication skills, teamworking, presentation skills; the advantages of undertaking a period of work-experience whilst in Higher Education – including paid and unpaid periods of formal work placements, internships and volunteering; and the manner in which graduates are able to link education to employment.

A qualitative approach to the interviews proved particularly useful because it provided empirically grounded research tools necessary for individual interviewers within each country to explore fully the relevant issues, whilst giving the participants the freedom and opportunity to discuss matters they felt important. Flexibility was an essential part of the interview process; the interviewers were permitted to paraphrase the questions as necessary depending upon the context and format of each individual interview. Interviews were conducted in the participants' own language and where necessary later translated into English. Following this they were transcribed and analysed utilising grounded theory methodology. This involved undertaking a constant comparative analysis in which data was broken down into discrete phenomenon, events, opinions, acts and ideas from which common themes and issues were identified (STRAUSS & CORBIN, 1998).

From a methodological perspective, one of the unforeseen issues faced by the research team during the course of the study reflected experiences of working in a cross-cultural European team. Indeed, for all team members, working as part of such a team proved extremely challenging, particularly in terms of the diverse range of experiences, perceptions and academic 'norms' brought by each individual. The impact that diverse cultural and academic practices had on the research process (WEETMAN, 2006; HEARNS et al, 2007) is impossible to quantify; however there is little doubt that participation in the study promoted a degree of mutual understanding and added to the richness of the study findings. Moreover, the use of qualitative methods within a European context allowed the researchers to identify comparable subject meanings across the participant countries (KELCHTERMANS et al., 1994).

#### **4. Conceptual Framework**

Central to the study's methodology was the need to conceptualise 'graduate employability' and in doing so develop an approach suitable to investigate two strands of the Bologna Declaration, quality assurance in Higher Education, and increased

recognition of qualifications across Europe. The need to encapsulate recent graduates' and employers' perspectives meant that the Lisbon strategic goal of increased employer engagement was also central in determining a suitable research approach (CEC, 2004, 2005). Pedagogically, BOURDIEU's conceptualisation of cultural capital, field and habitus (REAY, 1998) was used to frame the manner in which social structures in each of the four countries included within the study were interweaved with students' (and consequently recent graduates') experiences (BOURDIEU, 1988, 1990; BOURDIEU and PASSERON, 1994). However, Bourdieu's contestation that Higher Education acts to perpetuate social inequalities proved troublesome for the cross-cultural research team who chose to take a more global perspective based upon active participation (McGREW, 2000) within a democratic and interdependent European framework (OLSENN, 2006). The pedagogical grounding of the study utilising BOURDIEU'S conceptualisation of cultural capital, field and habitus provided the wider framework for the questions and allowed the researchers to consider the symbolic manner in which *capital* may be embodied within graduates' and employers' perceptions (BOURDIEU, 1988).

## **5. Study Findings**

The interviews focused on three areas of Higher Education relevant to Business and Management graduate employability: Discipline-specific business skills and knowledge: 'Soft-skills': Work-based learning. The interviews were recorded and data analysed using grounded-theory techniques. In the course of the analysis a fourth theme pertaining to graduate employability emerged; the 'added-value' of Higher Education.

### **5.1 Discipline-specific business skills and knowledge**

In order to determine the value of the content of business and management Higher Education, recent graduates and employers were asked to comment on which parts of the curricula they felt to be most valuable in the workplace. From the graduates' perspectives, discipline-specific skills and abilities were identified as being important to the workplace:

"Marketing and Organizational Behaviour have been most useful in my employment ... I have to write business plans and I need to understand how people think ..."  
(Austrian Graduate).

"The marketing modules have been most helpful to my job ... I apply what I learnt almost every day" (UK Graduate).

"My finance skills are the most useful in my current position ... I also find Human Resources beneficial almost every day ..." (Slovenian Graduate).

Employers also identified discipline-specific areas as being important:



“From our perspective, we need graduates to have a good understanding of marketing, finance and general business” (UK Employer, Public Sector).

“Graduates have to have excellent numeric abilities and be able to apply the financial skills learnt in education” (Austrian Employer, Finance).

“We expect new graduates to be competent in all areas covered by a Business Degree, but particularly in accounting, marketing and strategy” (Romanian Employer, Industry).

Given the differences in length of study, it is perhaps surprising that employers and graduates in all four countries had similar expectations of business and management education. However, for the majority of participants, the value of Business and Management education was not so much a reflection of the perceived amount of knowledge possessed by graduates, but focused more on the ability of individual graduates to *apply* the business skills and knowledge acquired in education to the work environment. This was most keenly expressed by employers:

“Graduates need to be able to apply their skills to a wide range of different business situations. The content of the job requires the ability to use skills in subjects such as marketing, finance, and strategy ...”  
(Romanian Employer, Local Government).

“Graduates have to be able to use IT skills, business related skills and business knowledge...”  
(Slovenian Employer, Local Industry)

“We expect them to have business acumen, to be able to have the ability to take hold of reality and apply the knowledge they’ve gained at University...”  
(Austrian Employer, Local Government)

Graduates were also aware of the need to apply knowledge and theory:

“I use all the modules in my job - everyday. Whatever I’m doing I always begin PEST and a SWOT<sup>3</sup> analysis”.  
(UK Graduate)

“I need an understanding of business strategy and management and to be able to apply the theory to each task I undertake ...” (Austrian Graduate)

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<sup>3</sup> SWOT/PEST: Both of these terms are used widely in Business Analysis. A SWOT analysis involves a critique of the Strengths/ Weakness/ Opportunities and Threats of and to an organisation, situation, event or similar. A PEST analysis involves a critique of the Physical, Environmental, Social & Technological aspects.



Not surprisingly, discipline-specific skills and knowledge were valued highly by employers and graduates alike across all four countries included in the study. However, for the majority of the participants, 'core' business knowledge and ability represented only a small part of the graduate portfolio.

## **5.2 The value of "soft skills"**

A less predictable finding related to the value given to soft skills by employers and graduates in all four countries. For employers, one of the most important graduate skills reflected high levels of business acumen:

“Business acumen is the one key thing we look for the most. Many students fall down on this. Even business students have less business acumen than you might expect...”  
(UK Employer, Local Industry)

“We’re looking for people with business acumen, people who understand what’s going on in the business world...”  
(Austrian Employer, Finance)

“Graduates often do not know how to combine things, they do not know how things are connected to each other. There is a lack of overall thinking. Recent graduates have to have the ability to see the bigger picture”  
(Romanian Employer, Finance)

Somewhat surprisingly, although business acumen appeared to be highly valued by employers, it was not mentioned by graduates.

Whilst graduates did not appear to consider the importance of business acumen in terms of their employability, other less tangible and more generic skills were identified as being particularly important by both employers and graduates. The value of good communication and writing skills was discussed by all participants:

“The key skills we expect are communication skills. Good report writing is particular necessary...”  
(Austrian Employer, Public Administration)

“Recent graduates have to have the ability to write in a formal and business-like manner...”  
(UK Employer, Local Industry)

“I learned how to write in a very accurate and detailed manner style. This is vital in my position”  
(Austrian Graduate)

“At University we were taught how to write methodically. This is very useful in my current role”.  
(Romanian Graduate)

Likewise, presentation skills were also noted to be of value:

“Presentations skills are very important...”  
(Romanian Employer, Finance)

“Communication skills are important [ ] and we need them to be good at making presentation...”  
(UK Employer, Local Industry)

“I use my presentation skills a lot. Last week I had to present in front of the Managing Directors, it was very nerve-wracking”.  
(UK Graduate)

“I find it is important that I have good verbal communication skills particularly when I am presenting a formal report to my colleagues”  
(Austrian Graduates)

Whilst presentation skills were identified as being important by the majority of graduate and employer participants, one of the most notable issues to emerge out of the analysis reflected graduates’ perceptions of their abilities in this area. Many perceived there to gaps in their learning and subsequent abilities in this area:

“I would have liked more formal lessons on presenting. How to do a presentation – what to include, how to speak in public... At University I learned how to do presentations whilst I was going along... I need to be better at presenting than I am...”  
(UK Graduate)

“Although my presentation skills improved as I progressed through the course.... I would have like some sort of training in presenting as my current skills aren’t as good as I would like...”  
(Austrian Graduate)

“I would have liked more opportunity to practice presenting as part of my degree course... This is particularly relevant now...  
... when I have to present at work I feel out of my depth...”  
(Slovenian Graduate)

The reported ‘gap’ in undergraduate education in respect of ‘presentation skills’ was identified by graduates in all four countries. Whilst this may have been a reflection of the relative inexperience and young age of the graduate participants, it would seem that this is an issue Higher Education needs to address.

For many of the employer and graduate participants, the most important ‘soft-skill’ possessed by graduates reflected the ability to work in ‘teams’ and ‘groups’:

“We had to do a lot of group work at University..... Although I didn’t like it then [ ]... I now work in team all the time and can see why we did so much group-work...”  
(UK Graduate)

“On my course we did a lot of teamwork training. In my job I needed to do some teambuilding... I used the team building skills I learned at University at work... it helped everyone pull together”  
(Austrian Graduate)

“At University we were required to work in groups. I did not see why at the time. But now I have to work in a team. I use the skills I acquired at University to build the team, to help us work together”.  
(Slovenian Graduate)

Employers perceived such team-working skills to be a vital part of the graduate portfolio:

“It’s important that recent graduates work well as part of a team...”  
(Slovenian Employer, Public Administration)

“Recent graduates have to work as part of the team...”  
(Romanian Employer, Local Industry)

“Of course, we expect graduates to have excellent team-working skills”.  
(UK Employer, Local Industry)

The study findings in relation to 'soft-skills' supports the literature in relation to graduate employability. Employers expected graduates to have high levels of communication, presentation, team-working and written skills. The value of such skills in promoting a smooth transition from education to employment was discussed at length by graduates from all four countries. One vital ingredient in equipping graduates with the necessary 'softer' skills related not to the classroom, but to the value of formal work-based learning such as placements and internships.

### **5.3 The value of work-based learning**

The nature of formal work-based learning as part of undergraduate programmes varied greatly in all four countries. In the UK, many of the recent graduates interviewed had undertaken a year long 'formal' paid work-placement. Whilst in Slovenia, Austria and Romania work based learning tended to comprise one or more 'formal' unpaid internships of between three and twelve months (with six months being the most widely experienced). Despite such differences, the experiences gained during a period of work-based learning programmes represented a significant part of recent graduates' experiences (irrespective of whether such learning occurred as part of a placement or period of internship). As such it was valued highly by employers:

"The placement year is a real winner for employers. The students who've had real experiences of the work environment come out on top in the employment stakes".  
(UK Employer, Finance)

"We took on a graduate who had undertaken a formal internship... This individual had specific skills in venture capital and finance acquired during his internship..."  
(Austrian Employer, Local Industry)

"We like graduates to have some prior work experience, either an internship or part time work".  
(Slovenian Employer, Public Administration)

From the graduates' perspectives, experiential and work-based learning afforded multiple benefits allowing them to apply and hone theoretical skills learnt in education to 'real-life';

"My work placement [ ] gave me the opportunity to develop my report writing skills as well as my ICT and accounting skills. I got so much out of it..."  
(UK Graduate)

"My internship was very relevant to my course. I used the knowledge I gained in education to develop my employer's handbooks. I learned so much".  
(Slovenian Graduate)

“I did an internship in the United States..... it taught me a lot  
And gave me the opportunity to apply what I'd learnt  
in the classroom to a real work situation”.  
(Austrian Graduate)

Conversely, for some of the graduates the most valuable part of formal work-experience work-based learning was that such experiences enhanced subsequent University based learning:

“...because of what I'd learned on my placement,  
my overall grades improved greatly in the final year...”  
(UK Graduate)

“After my internship my work was much better than in other  
years. I was able to make sense of what I was being taught...”  
(Romanian Graduate)

Other graduates described how such experiences had improved their employment prospects:

“I did an internship at an international bank in New York...  
It was [ ] really useful when applying for work...”  
(Austrian Graduate)

“My internship was very enjoyable; it gave me real experience  
and helped me get such a good job”.  
(Slovenian Graduate)

“My placement was fantastic. I was given a lot of responsibility  
and allowed to develop... This meant that when I applied for  
jobs I had something real to put on my CV”.  
(UK Graduate)

Whilst work-based learning programmes were highly valued by graduates and employers alike, it was recognised by employers that many recent graduates do not have the opportunity to take part in such formal training and that work-based learning within the educational institution forms a vital part of business and management education. However, employers also acknowledged that ‘formal’ work experience is not the only source of ‘real-life’ employment undertaken by students many of whom need to work part-time during their education to subsidise their income.

#### 5.4 "Added-value" of education

During the interviews it became apparent that for the graduate and employer participants, University-level education represented far more than a formal qualification and the acquisition of discipline-specific and softer skills and knowledge. Indeed for many, 'graduateness' represented a complex amalgam of experiential learning that enhanced individual students global outlook and vision:

"For me University was more about the overall experience than what I was learning... [ ] It gave me the tools to think outside the normal... [ ] to look at life differently".  
(Austrian Graduate)

"...it's far easier when you've studied to see the bigger picture, to know how everything interconnects and how it's related..."  
(UK Graduate)

"...it's very important for my self-confidence to have graduated from University.... as a graduate I have a broader overview of everything..."  
(Austrian Graduate)

Likewise, for employers, the added-value of employing a graduate was that a higher level business related qualification represented more than evidence of the acquisition and application of knowledge. It reflected an individual's ability to think in a critical and applied manner:

"It's important that they be able to think outside the box... Having studied at degree level means they know how to put forward an argument..."  
(UK Employer, Local Government)

"The discipline isn't so important, it's the other skills learned at University that are important. The analytical skills and problem solving skills..."  
(Austrian Employer, Finance)

"We prefer graduates because they are able to understand and analyse complex facts..."  
(Romanian Employer, Public Administration)

Employers also appreciated that graduates were able to think innovatively:

"We want someone who is innovative and who can come up with ideas. They need to be able to express their ideas..."  
(Romanian Employer, Finance)

“We prefer to employ graduates because they generally have a lot of fresh ideas...”  
(Austrian Employer, Local Industry)

“What’s important is commitment and talent in a young person. The ability to come up with new ideas and see things differently”.  
(UK Employer, Finance)

The expectation that graduates required less supervision, were more mature and able to fit into the work environment was also expressed by employers:

“Graduates need less supervision and want a real job with real responsibility. They want [ ] to use their knowledge and make a contribution [to become] useful members of the team...”  
(Austrian Employer, Public Administration)

“Having studied at degree level makes them more mature [ ] and more employable...”  
(Slovenia Employer, Local Industry)

“We’re after the added-value of the University experience... Someone who is flexible and who has the ability to prove themselves... Who can work without supervision...”  
(UK Employer, Public Administration)

For employers the ‘added value’ of a business focused education reflected the whole University experience manifested by well-rounded graduates who could enter and, with relative ease, fit into the business world.

## **6. Discussion**

The rich qualitative data generated by this study indicates the wide range of ways in which Business and Management undergraduate education is equipping European graduates with the necessary skills and competencies for success in the global workplace. The study findings suggest that within the context of business and management undergraduate education, EU policy drivers, rooted in Bologna, are beginning to shape curriculum development and delivery, with undergraduates in different member states experiencing a similar ‘core’ education. Moreover, from employers’ and graduates’ perspectives, policies aimed at enhancing quality in Higher Education appear to be working, with both groups viewing the content and context of business and management education positively. The conceptual framework developed at the beginning of the study draws together policy drivers of quality in Higher Education and the need for Higher Education institutions to take account of employers’ views and requirements. In doing so it conceptualises graduate employability as the lynch-pin between Higher Education and



employers. In this unique position, graduates, and the institutions in which they are educated, have much to contribute to the wider community. Hence it is vital that education provides the discipline-specific knowledge and skills required by the workforce.

The practical usefulness of business school-acquired skills and knowledge described by graduate respondents, brings into question earlier criticisms about the manner in which knowledge acquired in Higher Education settings is, or is not, transferred into 'real-world' situations (ARAM and SALIPANTE, 2003; BLOOD, 2006; SELVARAJAH, 2006). It also reinforces the value of formal work-based 'real-life' learning (BRODIE & IRIVING 2007; FORRESTER-JONES and HATZIDIMITRIADOU, 2006). In the case of the graduate study participants, the seemingly successful transfer of knowledge into work may be partly attributable to the fact that the majority of graduates included in the study had undertaken a period of work-based learning as part of their undergraduate programme. This support arguments that 'business managers cannot be simply created in the classroom' (GOSLING and MINTZBERG, 2004: 19; see also MINTSBERG, 2002; VU, 2004) and suggests that consideration needs to be given to incorporating formal work-based learning across the undergraduate Business and Management curricula.

From an employability perspective, there seems little argument that good work-based learning placements and internships constitute an important learning experience for students equipping them with 'real-life' skills and work experience (ROBINSON, 2000; SIEBERT et al, 2002) whilst acting to promote graduate employability thereby meeting the needs of the workforce. Furthermore, in addition to adding value to the organisation in which they are employed, interns and placement students make a considerable contribution to economy (STOKES, 1993; ELLIS, 2000). Academically, vocational work-based learning enables undergraduates to develop further their understanding of core discipline-focused knowledge and skills whilst providing the ideal setting in which they are able to acquire and hone *softer* employability competencies desired by employers (FRY, 2001; HARVEY & KNIGHT, 2005; GRIBBEN, 2006). In sum, formal work-based learning significantly enhances graduate employability by preparing students for practicalities of the world of work and ultimately for management (HARTOG & FRAME, 2004; RAYFIELD, 2005; TYSOME, 2006).

Whilst the study findings reinforce earlier arguments regarding the need for an occupational based curricula (ACHTENHAGEN and GRUBB, 2002) in which vocational undergraduate education is aimed at meeting the needs of a 'knowledge driven' economy (BROWN, 2006), the role of Universities in equipping graduates with generic 'softer' skills remains the subject of much debate between academe and employers (JOHNSON, 2007). From a pedagogical perspective, the proposition that Higher Education take account of employers' expectations and demands suggests a need for a 'collective' approach to curricula development (ALEXANDER, 2006). Such an approach needs to encapsulate and cultural differences *within* and *across* EU member states whilst promoting an underlying ethos of quality in all European Higher Education Institutions.

## **7. Conclusion**

In conclusion, the study findings lead to the suggestion that in order to meet the ever-changing needs of a global workforce, European Business and Management programmes should consider introducing a period of formal work-based learning within the Business School curricula. This would enhance the development of 'softer skills' required by employers such as communication and presentation skills, business acumen and the ability to see the bigger picture. The paper argument reinforces Bourdieu's arguments in relation to cultural capital, field and Habitus (REAY, 1998) and supports the notion that Higher Education has a responsibility to equip graduates with cultural capital whilst providing them with the tools with which they are able to actively participate in an increasingly global workforce (McGREW, 2000). Whilst many Higher Education institutions are beginning to introduce work-based learning, there is still some way to go before all undergraduate students are provided with the opportunity to acquire cultural capital whilst testing the applicability of what they have been taught within a real-life work situation. Ten years on, it seems Bologna is beginning to work in terms of the harmonisation of education and graduate skills, however, the long term impact of this on students, graduates and employers is yet to be established.

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## **Appendix I: Interview guide: Employers**

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this interview. My name is [ ] and I'm from [ ]. Before we start I need to briefly explain to you exactly what the purpose of the interview is and to make sure that you understand what we're going to talk about. The research I'm doing aims to assess the usefulness and relevance of business related degree/colleges course to post-University/college employment. It's part of a much larger European study the results of which will be used to develop a set of core competencies and skills to be taught on business courses. What we talk about will remain strictly confidential in that your name and other details, and those of your organization will be kept confidential and will not be revealed to anyone outside the Aston members of the research team.

It is important that you understand that whilst the information gained during the course of this, and the other interviews may be used for the basis of publications, all organizational and personal details will remain totally confidential. Likewise, nothing you have said will be repeated to your employer or the graduates whom you employ and they will not have any access whatsoever to the interview transcript. Whilst your perspectives will be invaluable in helping the research team identify key skills and competencies gained at University (or college), none of the lecturing or administration staff at any University (or college) or any other institution will be able to trace any part of this interview back to you.

You may conclude the interview at any time and request to see a transcript of the interview once it's complete. All transcripts will be destroyed at the end of the project.

Could you please sign here to confirm you agree to be interviewed as part of the study and that I have discussed these matters with you and that you understand that the issues raised during the course of the interview may partly form the basis of future publications.

SIGNATURE OF  
INTERVIEWEE\_\_\_\_\_

PRINT  
NAME \_\_\_\_\_

—

DATE \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

[Prompts are written in *italics*]

**# All questions may be paraphrased/ or the order re-organised to suit interview conditions/ local and national contextual differences #**

**Section 1: Background Details:**

1. Name:
2. Age:
3. Occupation:
4. Organisational address:
5. Organisational function and sector:
6. Number of employees within organisation:
7. Number of graduates recruited annually:
8. How many graduates are you directly responsible for:

**Section 2: Interview questions (prompts given in italics)**

**Employers of Bachelors Degree holders**

- Does [your organisation] have a formal graduate employment or recruitment programme?
  - o *How does this operate?*
  - o *What qualifications do people need to get onto the programme?*
  - o *Is the programme open to those with a particular degree – or do you take graduates from any field?*
  - o *In what way does the programme benefit the organisation?*
  - o *In what way does the programme benefit the graduates you employ?*
- Are there any positions in your organisation that are designated 'graduate posts?'
  - o *What sort of jobs are these?*
  - o *Are such positions open to those with a particular degree – or do you take graduates from any field?*
  - o *Why are they designated as such?*
  - o *How many such positions exist?*
  - o *What is it about such jobs that make them particularly suitable for graduates?*

**Fachhochschulen/ Further Education Graduate Employers:**

Does [your organisation] have a formal employment or recruitment programme which specifically targets [Fachschulen/ Further Education College] leavers?

- How does this operate?
  - What qualifications do people need to get onto the programme?
  - Is the programme open to those with a particular qualification – or do you take college leavers from any field?
  - In what way does the programme benefit the organisation?
  - In what way does the programme benefit the college leavers you employ?
- Are there any positions in your organisation that are designated for FH/FE leavers?
- *What sort of jobs are these?*
  - *Are such positions open to those with particular college level qualification – [such as an NVQ in business] – or do you take college leavers from any field?*
  - *Why are they designated as such?*
  - *How many such positions exist?*
  - *What is it about such jobs that make them particularly suitable for college leavers?*

All employers:

- Does your organisation have any formal or traditional links or relationships with any particular Universities [or colleges]
- How would you describe such relationships?
    - *How are such relationships manifested?*
      - *Historic links*
      - *Business partnerships*
      - *Educational partnerships*
      - *Training agreements*
    - *How strong are the links?*
      - *Who is the 'lead' partner?*
- Are there any positions in your organisation where, if possible, you would prefer to employ a graduate/college leaver instead of someone without a degree/ college level education even though the job itself is not designated to be a graduate/ college leaver position?
- *What sort of jobs are these?*
  - *Why do you prefer to place graduates in these positions?*

- *If a degree isn't necessary, why would a graduate/ college leaver choose to apply for such a job?*
  - *Promotion prospects*
  - *Reputation of organisation*
  - *Pay and working conditions*
  - *Personal choice*
  
- Are graduate/ college applicants required to undertake any sort of entrance tests or examinations?
  - *What format do such examinations take?*
  - *How do they inform your decision in respect of which graduates to employ?*
  
- What key skills are you looking for when employing a business graduate/ individual who has successfully completed a business related college course?
  - *Communication skills*
  - *Networking*
  - *Report writing*
  - *ICT*
  - *Business related skills*
  - *Business knowledge*
  - *Business experience*
  
- In what way does employing a graduate/ college leaver benefit your organisation?
  - *Knowledge*
  - *Key skills*
  - *Management skills*
  - *Highly trained personal*
  - *Need for less supervision*
  - *Mature approach to work*
  
- What are the most important factors you take into consideration when recruiting graduates/college leaver?
  - *Level of degree/qualification*
  - *Focus of degree/ qualification*
  - *Contents of degree/ qualification*
  - *Previous work experience*
  - *Performance at interview*
  - *Extra curricula activities*

- *Guild activities*
- *Committee membership*
- *Voluntary work*
- *Sports involvement*
- *Social activities*

- What training and support do you offer newly appointed graduates/ college leavers within your organisation?
- What specific 'business focused' skills do you feel ought to be taught at University [college].
- How important do you feel previous work experience is for graduates/ college leaver?
- Did any of the graduates/college leavers employed by your organisation undertake a sandwich course or do any other sort of vocational work placement as part of their course?
  - In what ways does work-based learning, such as the experiences gained on a formal work placement, benefit your organisation?
  - In what ways is practical work experience complementary to the academic and theoretical knowledge gained at University?
- Are there any other factors that I haven't discussed that your organisation takes into consideration when recruiting or employing graduates/ college leavers?

## **Appendix 2: Graduate interview guide:**

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this interview. My name is [ ] I'm from [ ]. Before we start I need to briefly explain to you exactly what the purpose of the interview is and to make sure that you understand what we're going to talk about. The research I'm doing aims to assess the usefulness and relevance of your [degree/college] course to your post-[University/college] employment. It's part of a much larger European study the results of which will be used to develop a set of core competencies and skills to be used in the development of future business courses. What we talk about will remain strictly confidential; your name and other details, and those of your employer and University, will be will not be revealed to anyone outside [ ] the research team.

It is important that you understand that whilst the information gained during the course of this, and the other interviews may be used for the basis of publications, all organizational and personal details will remain totally confidential. Likewise, nothing you

have said will be repeated to your employer and they will not have any access whatsoever to the interview transcript. Whilst your perspectives will be invaluable in helping the research team identify key skills and competencies gained at University (or college), none of the lecturing or administration staff at your University (or college) will be able to trace any part of this interview back to you.

You may conclude the interview at any time and request to see a transcript of the interview once it's complete. All transcripts will be destroyed at the end of the project.

Could you please sign here to confirm you agree to be interviewed as part of the study and that I have discussed these matters with you and that you understand that the issues raised during the course of the interview may partly form the basis of future publications.

SIGNATURE OF  
INTERVIEWEE \_\_\_\_\_

PRINT  
NAME \_\_\_\_\_

—

DATE \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

[Prompts are written in *italics* ]

**# All questions may be paraphrased/ or the order re-organised to suit interview conditions/ local and national contextual differences #**

## **SECTION I: BACKGROUND QUESTIONS**

### **Section I: Background Details:**



1. Name:
2. Home Address:
3. Age:
4. How would you describe your ethnicity:
5. Marital status:
6. Housing tenure – (ie living with parents may be relevant):
7. Dependents:

### **Educational Details**

8. Type of (secondary) school attended:
9. Highest level of education prior to attending HE/FE:
10. Previous business related courses undertaken:
11. University/College Attended:
12. Year of enrolment:
13. Age on graduation:
14. Qualifications attained:

### **Employment Details**

15. Job title:
16. Employers name/address:
17. Employment sector:    Business (Private)

Public (Government)

Not-for-Profit (Voluntary/3<sup>rd</sup> Sector)

18. Date when first began current employment:
19. Hours worked per week:
20. Are you employed on a temporary or permanent contract:
21. Income? – Less than £10,000

£10,000-£14,999

£15,000-£19,999

£20,000-£24,999

£25,000 +

This question needs to be contextualised as appropriate taking into account local (national) graduate earnings and local currencies. For the purposes of conducting a comparative analysis all data submitted for this question will need to be given/shown in Euros.

**Background questions: Education, employment and training**

22. Details of previous employment:

Post education

During education

Pre-education

23. Qualifications required for current employment:

24. Training courses attended in employment:

25. Are you currently enrolled on any part-time educational courses either at college or University?

- If yes, please describe:
- Is this educational course linked to your employment?
  - o How?

**SECTION 2: Experiences of Higher Education/ Fachusculen/ Further Education** College

- How would you describe your experiences at [University/College]
  - o *What was the most positive part of your course*
  - o *What did you like the best?*
  - o *Which modules did you most enjoy?*
  - o *What did you like the least*
  - o *Which modules did you least enjoy?*
- Why did you choose to undertake [name of course undertaken]
- Who or what influenced your choice of degree course?
  - o *Parents*
  - o *Friends*
  - o *Career choice*
  - o *Teachers*

- *What else did you think of doing?*

### **Business course specific questions**

This first question may be adapted to reflect national or local educational courses and modules.

- What business related modules did you undertake?
  - *Accounting*
  - *Business culture*
  - *Business decision analysis*
  - *Business law*
  - *Business strategy*
  - *Economics*
  - *Entrepreneurship*
  - *European business*
  - *Financial management*
  - *HR and employee relations*
  - *Information and communications technology*
  - *Information management*
  - *International business*
  - *Management consultancy*
  - *Marketing*
  - *Operations management*
  - *Organisational behaviour*
  - *Organisational change*
  - *Organisational development*
  - *Organisational management*
  - *Psychology of business*
  - *Sociology of business*
  - *Strategic management*
  - *Other business related modules*
  - *Other relevant modules*
- Which of these was the most influential when you were thinking about career choice?
- Which modules have been the most useful during your employment?
- Which modules have been the least useful during your employment?
- **Bachelors level Degree holders only:** More jobs now require graduate level entrée requirements, in which ways would you say that being a graduate is important to what you do in your current employment? [This question needs to](#)

be paraphrased to reflect national and local trends in respect of graduate employment

- What parts of your job do not require a graduate education?

**Sub-Degree qualification level holders only:**

- Is a [Fachschullen] Further Education college level business qualification an entree requirement of your current position? *[was this a pre-requisite for your current job]*
- How do you apply what you learnt at [the Fachschullen/ college] to your current position?
  - o *How does having a business qualification place you at an advantage?*
  - o *What parts of your job do not require a college level education?*

**All students:**

- Have you used the skills acquired at University [college] whilst at work – *This question may be paraphrased and asked more than once, ie. how have your marketing skills come in useful during your employment; how has the psychology you learnt at University come in useful during your employment; how do you use the ICT skills you gained at University... etc*
  - o *What particular skills learnt at [college] University have proved to be the most useful in education*

**Bachelors level graduates only: Graduateness**

- In what ways does being a graduate feature in your future plans
  - o *How do you feel having a degree will help you in your future career*
  - o *What aspects of your degree do you think will prove most helpful in the future*
- How does having a University level education place you at an advantage
- How do you use the academic skills you learned at University in your employment?
- How do you use the social skills you acquired at University in your employment?
- How important are the social networks and support structures you made at University to your current position?
- In what ways do you think that such social networks might come in useful in the future
- How has a University education impacted upon the way you view the future?
- How have you taken personal responsibility for your future skill and career development?

### **Work based learning as an integral part of education**

This needs to be contextualised from a local perspective – different terminology may apply (internship/ practicum etc). What we need to ascertain is whether the participant undertook a prolonged period of work experience as an integral part of their degree or college course (ie a period of at least 6-12 months. In Addition to this we need to identify which of the participants undertook college based vocational training in which vocational training formed an integral part of work based learning (ie. 2 days in the classroom/ 3 days at work per week throughout their course).

- Did you do a placement/ sandwich course?
  - o *Work placed training/ education*
- If not, did your course entail any formal work experience?
  - o *How would you describe your experiences of work experience/ the placement?*
  - o *Where was your placement/work experience?*
  - o *What type of work did you do?*
  - o *What did you enjoy the most whilst undertaking work experience?*
  - o *What did you enjoy the least?*
  - o *How were you able to link what you had learned [were learning] at University/ College to what you did at work?*
  - o *What would you say was the most valuable thing you got out of doing a placement?*
- Did your placement/ work experience complement what you have learned at University/ college?
  - o *How has the fact that you had a period of work experience/ work placement been helpful in securing employment?*

### **Generic educationally focused questions**

#### **Teamwork:**

- How much of your [degree] course involved group work?
- What sort of group work did your course involve?
- What role did you take in this group work?
  - o *Did you take a lead role in group work at University*
  - o *What level of responsibility did you adopt whilst undertaking group work?*
  - o *How did your group work as a team?*
  - o *What did you personally do to make sure that your group worked as a team?*

- *How did you deal with weaker or uncooperative group members*

### **Verbal communication and presentation skills:**

- How often were you required to do a presentation in front of your class/ lecturer whilst at University (college)
- What type of work were required to present?
- How did you feel the first time you gave a presentation?
- How did your presentation skills improve as you progressed in your studies?
  - *Increased confidence*
  - *Communication skills*
  - *Presentation skills*
  - *How did feedback from students/ lecturer help you in preparing for future presentations*

### **Writing skills**

- What type of writing skills did you develop at University?
- What format did your written work at University take?
- What type of writing skills do you use in your employment?
- How have the report/essay writing skills you gained at University been of use in your employment?
  - *Essay/report planning skills: At University you would have needed to write your essays in a logical and critical manner how have you been able to apply the same practices to your employment?*
  - *Critiquing skills*

### **Other educational experiences**

- Were you required to keep a 'personal development' file whilst at University?
  - *How did this help you in finding employment?*
- What extra-curricula activities did you get involved in at University?
  - *External voluntary work for example*
    - *Mentorship in schools*
    - *Community work*
  - *Internal voluntary work*
    - *Committee membership (University)*
    - *Class Rep*
    - *Course Rep*

- *Guild/ students union activities*
- *Sports clubs*
- *Other societies*
- *Debating clubs*
- *Subject focused groups*
- *Special interest groups*
- How many of these 'extra-curricula' interests do you continue to undertake?
- How have such extra-curricula activities assisted you in finding employment?
- In what way have the experiences you gained from getting involving in such activities been of use in your current employment?

### **SECTION 3: LINKING EMPLOYMENT AND EDUCATION**

#### **Assistance from educational institution in finding employment: careers service**

- Does your University have a careers service?
- How did the careers service assist you in finding employment?
- Did you go to any training sessions arranged by the careers service?
  - *In what way were they useful?*
- In what way were the other events arranged by the careers service useful to you when looking for a career?
  - *Graduate employment fairs*
  - *Employer presentations*
  - *Interview sessions*
  - *The use of employment related data-bases*
  - *Advice of continuing in education.*

#### **Applying for employment**

- How many jobs did you apply for before finding a position?
- When filling out application forms how did you relate the skills learned at University to the work situation
  - *For example team work skills learned in modules such as the business game – leadership – writing*
- Did you attend any graduate recruitment centre's/ assessment weekends
  - *How did you use the skills you'd gained at University to your advantage during such assessments/ interviews*



- When filling out application forms did you feel pressured to fit the 'criteria' of the job

- **Background questions**

- Can you describe what you do in a typical day?
- Do you have any managerial responsibilities?
- Who are you accountable to?
- Why did you choose to do this particular job?

- **Linking education and work**

- How did your time at University/college prepare you for the work environment?
- How have you been able to apply the skills learned at University to your employment?
- Did you do any management courses or courses about managing human relations at University?
  - o *How have these course been of help in your employment?*
- How is your job related to your degree/ education?
- Which models and theories that you learned at University/ college have been able to apply to the work environment – ie. *PEST ANALYSIS/ SWOT ANALYSIS/ Management theories/ sociology of organisations etc*
- How have the leadership skills developed at University come in useful in the employment setting?
  - o *Leadership skills gained by experiences of taking part in: presentations/ group working/ social skills/ participation in team exercises such as business game*
- What other skills did you develop at University that are particularly useful in employment
  - o *Budgeting skills*
  - o *Social skills*
  - o *Time management*
  - o *Self management*
  - o *Organisational management*
- How have you used the ICT skills developed at University whilst at work
  - o *WORD*
  - o *EXCEL*
  - o *POWERPOINT*
  - o *Report writing*
  - o *Presentations – graphs*
  - o *Statistical analysis*
  - o *Web design*

## **Teamworking**

- How much of your current position involves working in teams?
  - o *Always work as part of a team*
  - o *Innovative teams/ learning teams*
  - o *Periodic team brainstorming sessions (daily/ weekly etc)*
  - o *Inter-organisational teams*
  - o *Multi-agency teams*
  - o *Boundary spanning teams*
  - o *Electronic teams*
- When working in teams how useful have the experiences of team/ group work gained at college/University been?

## **- Communication and Presentation skills**

- Are you required to undertake verbal presentations at work?
  - o *What format do such presentations take?*
  - o *How have the presentational skills acquired at University/ college been of value to you when making presentations to your colleagues?*
- What sort of written communication skills are you required to use at work?
  - o *How have the report/ document writing skills learned at University/ college been use to you whilst at work*
  - o *When you're writing a report or document at work how do you try to look at both sides of the argument? ... in the same way as you would when writing an essay?*

## **Employment based training and education**

- How much 'on the job' training have you been given?
- Have you been on any formal training courses since starting work?
- How have you been able to apply what you learned at University/college to the 'on the job' and formal training you've been given during your employment?
- How have the communication skills developed at University come in useful since being at work

## **- Extra-curricula activities and employment**

- Which other activities did you get involved in whilst at University/college [please tick as appropriate]
  - *Class representative*
  - *University committees*
  - *Sports*
  - *Student's Union or Guild Activities*
  - *Student Mentoring*
  - *Student Tutor*
  - *Any other?*
- How have the experiences you gained whilst undertaking these activities impacted upon your employment?
  - *Influence of extra-curricula activities in informing career choice?*
  - *Usefulness of such activities when applying for employment?*
- What were the most valuable skills you acquired whilst undertaking these activities?
  - *Cross refer to work related skills*
- Did you get involved in any other voluntary activities whilst in education?
  - *What did you do?*
    - *Volunteering inside/outside education*
    - *Voluntary activities within the community*
- Were your volunteering activities arranged through the University/College?
- Do you still volunteer?
- How have the skills you acquired whilst volunteering shaped your experiences of employment?

### **Career motivations, ambitions and plans**

- To what degree has your education prepared you for the future?
- Where do you see yourself in 10 years time?
- Are there any other issues you would like to discuss

## **Author Details**

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